Vote no at University of Sydney and form a rank-and-file committee to prevent a sellout

Committee for Public Education
9 June 2023

At a hastily-called National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members meeting at the University of Sydney next Tuesday June 13, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, will urge a "no" vote on a proposed sellout deal.

In fact, no vote should even be held, because no agreement has been finalised! Nor have members had time to review the contents of the numerous new clauses suddenly unloaded on them last Thursday, on the eve of a King's Birthday long weekend. Members must have at least seven days to read and assess the clauses!

We call for the formation of a genuine rank-and-file committee to halt a shocking betrayal at USyd and for a broader struggle across all universities, and throughout the working class, against worsening real wage cuts, casualisation and intolerable conditions.

We urge USyd workers to join their colleagues across town at Macquarie University who formed an independent rank-and-file committee there yesterday, Friday, June 9, to take forward this crucial fight, against moves by the NTEU to split and divide members and push through retrograde pay-cutting agreements at one university after another.

There must be a breakout from the isolation imposed by the NTEU on USyd workers, confining them to strike action at one university for nearly two years. The warnings issued for months by the CFPE—despite its members being blocked from speaking—of a sellout being prepared at USyd have been confirmed.

1. In the most anti-democratic manner, the USyd management and the NTEU representatives are together trying to push through a rushed vote on Tuesday on a totally retrograde agreement without sufficient time for NTEU members to read and review, let alone discuss and debate, a host of new clauses.

There is a connection between the rush and the agreement's content. These clauses, suddenly seen by members for the first time, open the floodgates for new levels of exploitation of "education-focused" junior academics and "PhD fellows" (US-style graduate student staff) as well as allowing the huge use of insecure casuals to continue, and inflicting a substantial real pay cut over the next three years.

2. Moreover, the union admitted on Friday that an undisclosed number of members received no notice of Tuesday's meeting until late Thursday afternoon at 4.15 p.m.—just before the long weekend.

In response to an objection by CFPE member Zac Hambides, who was among those kept in the dark, an email from NTEU division organiser Amity Lynch provided no explanation, except that members' email accounts were "accidentally archived" when "something went wrong during a process of data being updated."

By denying those members notice of the meeting until late Thursday, the NTEU has breached its own rules, which state: "34.5 Members of a Branch shall be given no less than two working days written notice of the time(s) and place(s) of a General Meeting(s) and the business to be dealt with."

3. What the union's branch committee has sent out to members is a confusing mess of clauses from an internal NTEU working document, full of words added or crossed out from previous agreements. Yet the motion that the branch committee is proposing to put to Tuesday's meeting is: "That the branch endorses the Enterprise Agreement."

The NTEU's June 8 general email, sent at 4.15 p.m., contains a link to "an updated version" in which four major clauses "have been added or amended since the earlier version." No members have had access to these new clauses until then—less than two working days before Tuesday's meeting.

None of this is an aberration. The NTEU and the other main campus union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have used anti-democratic methods to ram through enterprise agreements for years, helping to decimate jobs and conditions and restructure universities along corporate and casualised lines.

By its own admission, the USyd NTEU branch committee is presenting a retrograde deal that is even worse than it presented to a members' meeting on April 18, when it presided over a bitter split vote to call off months of one- or two-day strikes on the basis of an in-principle agreement with the management.

In a gross understatement, branch president Nick Reimer said in an email to members that there are "major shortcomings" in the deal. They include management's insistence that up to 25 percent of academic staff be in "education focused" roles, with high teaching workloads, which opens the door" to a "two-tiered academic workforce."

A significant pay cut is involved because "management refused to offer an increase that keeps pace with inflation." By one estimate, an average staff member will be worse off by $100 a week by mid-next year. The proposed wage "rise" averages 4.275 percent per year, just over half the official inflation rate.

Even Reimer's claim to have "won a commitment to decreasing casualisation by 20 percent," permits the other 80 percent of casuals to remain in super-exploited, insecure positions.

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The revised clauses show that there are no guarantees that casual academic staff will be converted to permanent positions, as management will have the final say on any conversions, and casuals will have to compete against each other for them.

Contrary to the union's claims to have won sick leave for casuals, clause 220 (b) states that "No payment will be made for any period of non-attendance."

Clause 335 opens the way for a broader drive to push educators into heavy teaching loads. It "encourages" tenured academics to increase their teaching load beyond the traditional workload allocation of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20 percent administration.

Much more is contained in the fine print of all the clauses.

Similar disputes are underway across Sydney and the state of New South Wales (NSW), including at Macquarie University, the University of NSW, the University of Newcastle and the University of Wollongong, and throughout the country, including at the Australian National University in Canberra and Victorian and Queensland universities. As it has done for years, however, the NTEU is trying to isolate the struggles at each university.

We call for a no vote, and a united fight across campuses through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. The dispute at USyd can and must become part of a wider counter-offensive by educators and other workers. That includes the federal public service workers, covered by the CPSU, who have just overwhelmingly rejected—by 85 percent—a three-year deal from the federal Labor government that would slash real wages for around 160,000 workers, and the public health workers taking action in NSW against the state Labor government's below-inflation pay "rise" for public sector workers.

None of the three factions on the branch committee is offering a way forward. The "Thrive" faction is demanding a "yes" vote. It is threatening members that the management will respond to a "no" vote by calling a non-union ballot and/or invoking the Albanese government's new "intractable" dispute laws, which allow the Fair Work Commission to shut down strikes and imposed arbitrated outcomes in the interests of employers.

The pseudo-left "NTEU Fightback" faction is formally calling for a "no" vote but proposing no action beyond that. Throughout the dispute, it has helped the NTEU leadership block the CFPE's calls for a broader struggle and for rank-and-file workers to take matters into their own hands, against the NTEU straitjacket.

While also formally calling for a "no" vote, Reimer and his misnamed "Rank and File Action" faction are, in effect, echoing the "Thrive" group by warning of Labor's "intractable" dispute laws—far from proposing to resist them. It is presenting "extensive" strike action and "remobilisation" of the members as a daunting task, essentially blaming members for the NTEU's role in shutting down strikes on April 18 after keeping them isolated for so long.

At Tuesday's meeting, we will move a resolution to vote "no" and form a rank-and-file committee, uniting with the Macquarie University rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight at USyd for decent pay, conditions and job security, and for a broader struggle based on the development of demands to meet the needs of workers and students, not corporate restructuring. Such demands should include:

*** Annual pay rises, well in excess of inflation, to catch up on past losses**

*** Restoration of all jobs eliminated, including from 2020 to 2022**

*** Elimination of intolerable workloads that make genuine research or professional development impossible**

*** The right of all casualised university workers to secure and permanent employment if they want it**

*** Protection from the COVID pandemic, including safe, ventilated facilities and the right to work from home**

*** Free first-class education for all students, instead of the government pouring billions of dollars into preparations for more US-led wars.**

On this basis, the rank-and-file committee would make calls and send delegations appealing to CPSU members and all staff and students at USyd, Macquarie and across the country, as well as the federal and NSW public sector workers, for a joint struggle against real wage cuts, staff shortages and unbearable workloads.

Broader issues are at stake. The Albanese government's May 9 federal budget cut higher education expenditure by about 4 percent in real terms, on top of some $10 billion in cuts dating back to the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

By contrast, hundreds of billions are being poured into AUKUS submarines and other military spending to prepare for a US-led war against China, and into "stage three" tax cuts for the wealthy.

The unions are participating in the Labor government's Universities Accord review, which seeks to further restructure the universities to meet the vocational and research demands of the corporate elite and the AUKUS treaty.

To defeat another betrayal, and oppose this entire agenda, USyd workers need to take their struggle into their own hands. That means forming a rank-and-file committee to seek to develop a mass movement against the program of "sacrifice" and massive war spending being implemented by the Labor government.

This committee would link up to others in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in order to unite workers, including education workers, globally in this struggle. To discuss forming a USyd rank-and-file committee contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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